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ABSTRACT

This literature review groups reports and studies, on the usefulness of television technology in the teaching of reading, into two broad categories, those in which the medium is used to actually teach sound-symbol relationships and those in which the medium is used as a motivational device to interest children in print. "Sesame Street" and "Electric Company" are evaluated with respect to their effectiveness in promoting reading readiness and motivating interest in print. The conclusions of the study indicate that television seems to be dealing mainly with the surface structure of written language. Several questions are posed; (1) Can television go beyond to the higher level communication processes that take place when a reader interacts with a text? (2) Can it help to increase the productivity and quality of reading instruction? and (3) Can it eventually provide a viable alternative route to literacy for developing countries. It is suggested that the answers to these questions lie in future research and development policies. (LL)

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TELEVISION AND READING IN THE SEVENTIES

Topic of Session: Technology in Reading

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TELEVISION AND READING IN THE SEVENTIES

In their recent overview of the research Jamison, Suppes, and Wells (1974) concluded that television can teach all subject matters as effectively as traditional approaches do. However, reading cannot really be called a "subject," but rather a process through which one gets meaning from graphic stimuli. Can TV technology help children learn to read? The literature review that follows groups the reports and studies into two broad categories, those in which the medium is used to actually teach sound-symbol relationships and those in which the medium is used as a motivational device to interest children in print.

Television Programs that Teach

Sesame Street

Generally applauded by television people, parents, and its target audience of pre-schoolers, "Sesame Street" (SS), has met with negative reaction from some educators both here and abroad, notably in England where Monica Sims of BBC has refused to broadcast it (Mayer, 1972). Criticism has centered around such features as its "right or wrong" questioning techniques, adult-controlled communication patterns, and stress of rote-type learning.

However, The Educational Testing Service (ETS) first and second year evaluation studies (Ball and Bogatz, 1970; Bogatz and Ball, 1971) indicated that SS was highly successful in achieving

most of its goals across such variables as age, sex, social class, intelligence, and race. Large samples (first year N=943; second year N=566) selected to include statistically adequate numbers of subjects representing the above variables permit wide generalization of the findings. The experimental groups showed gains in in reading readiness activities such as naming letters, knowing letter sounds, sight reading, classifying, recognizing letters, and right-to-left orientation.

On the other hand, Jacksonville educator Herbert Sprigle (1972) has concluded that SS made no difference in preparing poverty children for school. According to scores on the Metropolitan Readiness Test, SS children were found to be no more "ready" for reading than children in a head start program and less "ready" than either their non-head start classmates or children in Sprigle's own "cognitively based" curriculum.

Sprigle's several small studies are interesting but can hardly be termed generalizable. Samples are small (24 matched pairs) and locally based. No control for at-home viewing was mentioned: if all groups were watching the show outside of school, the effect of the experimental variable was indeed diffused. In the "classmate" study, he failed to control for both IQ and social class: the mean IQ for the SS graduates, all head start children, was reported to be 83 whereas no IQ was reported for the classmates, described only as "children from families above the poverty guidelines and . . . not eligible for head start (p. 100)." Furthermore,

he chose to match SS as a total program against two fully developed curriculums, his own interactive-manipulative and a conventional pre-school program. Designed as a supplementary program for at-home or in-school use, SS was never intended to replace good early childhood education.

Sprigle's studies offer little challenge to the ETS findings that show SS to be a positive factor in developing selected reading readiness skills for its targeted population, ". . . disadvantaged children, at home, without benefit of head start or similar formal educational experiences." While it could be argued that the pre-school years should be spent on social and emotional development rather than on specific teaching of pre-reading skills, Stanley (1973) points out that ". . . many children are disadvantaged educationally in that without (emphasis mine) special help they will not acquire such skills."

The fact that SS is reaching a large, inner-city, disadvantaged population is borne out by a recent Yankelovich study (1973) which found that the show had over 90 per cent penetration in Bedford-Stuyvesant, East Harlem, and Chicago. Mothers in these communities credited the show with teaching their children to read and count, thus better preparing them for school. This supports the second year ETS finding that teachers evaluated SS graduates as being better prepared for school.

Electric Company

"Electric Company" (EC), the second effort by Children's Television Workshop (CTW) aimed directly at teaching reading, was also

evaluated by ETS (Ball and Bogatz, 1973). Once again the research design and sampling procedures were impressive: two major studies involved over 8,000 first- through fourth-graders in some 400 classes in Fresno, California; Youngstown, Ohio; Richmond, Virginia; and Washington, D.C.

In both Fresno and Youngstown, where out-of-class viewing was not yet possible, 100 classes (50 pairings) were randomly assigned to viewing-in-school (experimental) and non-viewing (control) conditions. The criterion measure, the specifically developed "Electric Battery," included: (1) Consonants, vowels, blends; (2) Letter groups -- vowel-consonant teams, digraphs, sight words; (3) Scanning for structure; and (4) Reading for meaning. The experimental target groups of all first-graders and second-graders in the lower half of their classes in reading gained significantly across the full spectrum of skills. Smaller gains were noted for third- and fourth-graders. The researchers suggest that this may be ascribed to a "ceiling" effect, in that many of the older children had already mastered most of these skills and therefore had little to gain.

In Richmond and Washington, EC was not used inschool, and the experimental variable was the amount of viewing at home. There appeared to be no significant differences between gains made by the encouraged-to-view and control groups. On one hand, both groups

viewed about the same amounts of time; on the other hand, Ball and Bogatz speculate, ". . . that the show simply did not have much positive direct impact when viewed at home. One would presume that without preparation and follow-up activities such as teachers usually supply . . at-home viewing suffers in relation to in-school viewing (p. 186)." This hypothesis is supported by Gagné (1974) who says that one limitation of television as a teaching medium is the lack of a performance-feedback portion of the learning act. He states that in the case of a motor or intellectual skill, ". . . a television program can introduce and guide the learning. But again . . . . The learner must have a chance to apply the skill (p. 1)."

The attitude portion of the ETS study found teachers receptive and favorable toward the program. Parents of the first-grade viewers thought that the program made better readers of their children.

This ready acceptance by both teachers and parents follwed the almost universally positive reactions with which EC was received by the general public. In a national survey, Herriott and Liebert (NJEA Review, 1973) found a warm response and high penetration for the second year of the program: 35 per cent of the nation's elementary schools are using the program in school. When the in-school viewers are added to those at home, more than 6.5 million children are now exposed to this reading-centered program, and "Decoder" has become as famous as the SS "Big Bird."

While there appears to be no negative evaluative research,

Roser (1974)has raised valid questions about EC's limited view of reading (a dcoding process rather than a communication process) and about some of the techniques used (rebus pictures that are related to the sounds rather than to the meaning of a message; unnatural sounding of symbols; and contrived, nonsensical messages to "decode"). Fearing that the heavy emphsis on sounding will encourage children to be "word callers," she sees as more valuable those portions which offer connected reading experiences, for example, "Those sequences which employ cloze procedure, folktale spoofs, and soap opera parodies (p.684)."

Gattegno's "Pop-ups"

It is precisely the "pop-up" techniques mentioned by Roser and used by EC to teach sound-symbol relationships in left-to-right order that Gattegno saw as television's greatest potential in teaching readihg (1969). The developer of "Words in Color" applied his approach to the electronic medium by creating one minute "pop-up" films that showed via animation how written language looks and works (Cazden, 1972). NBC carried some of these experimentally during the 1971-72 season, but no evaluation has been reported. Attempts to communicate with George Heinemann, Vice President for Children's Programming, about the fate of the series have proved unsuccessful. It appears that the major networks have left the overt teaching of reading to CTW and Public Television.

Television as a Motivational Device

In the affective domain, television and reading have been linked by researchers and practitioners. From his surveys of children in the Chicago area, Witty (1967) concluded that interests associated with television programs provide a stimulus for reading. Himmelweit, Oppenheim, and Vince (1958) found that television stimulated the reading interests of their British sample; they hypothesized that children have an underlying pattern of interests that are similar across media lines. Conversely, studies by Schramm, Lyle, and Parker (1961) concluded that children go to television to satisfy fantasy and entertainment needs and to print to satisfy informational needs.

Noting this difference of opinion, Feeley (1974) attempted to see if content interests were related to media choice. After interest clusters were established by factor analyses of the responses of over 500 children to an interest inventory, the media preferences elicited by each cluster were compared. Table 1 shows the boys' and girls' Read and Watch preferences in rank order. Generally, the patterns are quite similar as suggested by Himmelweit. However, Schramm's theory would seem partially supported in that within the Read rankings some informational clusters stood higher than they did in the Watch rankings. For example, the boys' Informational cluster ranked second on the Read side with a mean score of .43 and fifth on the Watch side but with a mean preference score of .66, suggesting that while boys liked to read informational content

Table 1

Boys and girls Read and Watch preferences in rank order

Read			Watch	
	Cluster	Average of Item Means	Cluster	Average of Item Means
	Boys (N=250)			
1.	Sports	.64	1. Sports	.87
2.	Informational	.43	2. Excitement-Fantastic	.79
3.	Excitement-Fantastic	.42	3. Excitement-Realistic	.68
4.	Excitement-Realistic	.38	4. Recreational	.68
5.	Recreational	.33	5. Informational	.66
6.	Fantasy-Comedy	.30	6. Fantasy-Comedy	.58
7.	Social Empathy	.25	7. Social Empathy	.46
8.	Artistic	.25	8. Artistic	.40
	Girls (N=282)			
1.	Social Empathy -- People, Problems	.51	1. Social Empathy -- Fun, Excitement	.74
2.	Hobbies-Arts	.51	2. Fantasy	.71
3.	Social Empathy -- Fun, Excitement	.50	3. Recreational	.70
4.	Fantasy	.50	4. Social Empathy -- People, Problems	.61
5.	Recreational	.45	5. Hobbies-Arts	.57
6.	Excitement-Realistic	.40	6. Excitement-Realistic	.57
7.	Social Studies	.39	7. Science	.49
8.	Science	.31	8. Sports	.46
9.	Sports	.28	9. Social Studies	.45

over most other clusters, they still preferred to watch this kind of content rather than to read it. This overall preference for viewing, cluster for cluster, was one of the most revealing findings of this study, indicating clearly that this is a watching generation.

The Philadelphia Program

In two separately developed programs, practitioners are capitalizing on children's strong interest in viewing to help them learn to read. The Philadelphia schools, under the direction of

Marjorie Farmer, is conducting a Television Language Arts-Reading Program (1973) with middle-elementary and junior-high children. The program uses videotapes of current commercial shows and TV scripts to teach reading and other communication skills. Children dramatize and perform the commercial scripts, comparing their pronunciation, inflection, and interpretation with the VTR versions. They write, dramatize, and tape their own original scripts. Since it is still in its first full year of operation, no evaluation has been reported.

Mount Vernon

A pilot program in the Mount Vernon, New York, Middle School is using the Philadelphia tapes in a reading skills program of its own. The school has a large black population of disabled readers. The writer observed a session in which seventh-graders viewed a segment of a videotape of "Sanford and Son," read the same from a script by assuming roles, and then proceeded to relate the part to the whole act. Naming the act and listing the events as they occurred supplied practice in the reading-thinking skills of identifying main ideas, related details, and sequence of events. Mount Vernon intends to design a year-long study around its program, testing its effectiveness via standardized measures of selected reading comprehension and study skills.

Conclusions

Researchers and reading teachers seem to be recognizing relationships between teh receptive modes of viewing and reading and are making use of children's great interest in television to teach reading. A recent IRA publication, Television and the Classroom Reading Program (Becker, 1973), is a further indication of this trend. Philadelphia and Mount Vernon are using sophisticated VTR technology to allow language to be received in natural, life-like situations and then be directly related to the more abstract delivery system of print. Perhaps these practices will prove helpful to older children who haven't succeeded with more conventional approaches and materials.

CTW appears to have "broken the ice," proving that TV can help young children learn basic decoding skills. This learning is more apt to take place when follow-up activities provide the performance-feedback loop of the learning act. Morrisett (1973) speaks of "interactive television," a potential of cable in which the set permits response by the viewer, thus allowing for performance-feedback. This capability should increase the medium's usefulness for reading instruction.

Still, at present, television seems to be dealing mainly with the surface structure of written language. Can it meet Roser's (1974) challenge to go beyond to the higher level communication processes that take place when a reader interacts with a text? Can it help to increase the productivity and quality of reading

instruction, thus possibly decreasing the need for expensive remedial programs? Can it eventually provide a viable, alternative route to literacy for developing countries?

The answers to these questions lie in future research and development policies. Jamison et al. (1974) have called for research that utilizes the "unique capabilities" of the medium. This is expensive. CTW, whose foundation support will run out this year, has been forced to curtail its experimental activities because of a 50 per cent cut in its Office of Education appropriations (Reading Today, 1974). If this represents a trend in future funding priorities, the thrust to link reading instruction with television technology, begun so positively in the early seventies, may plateau or decline by the end of the decade.

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